

MY LADY'S MONEY

By WILKIE COLLINS.

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG GIRL

PART THE FIRST.

THE DISAPPEARANCE.

"Are you aware of who Mr. Hardyman really is?" retorted her ladyship. "Or do you judge of his position by the vocation in life which he has apparently chosen to adopt? Can you tell me, if you do, that to whom I am to be married? If it is the Alfred Hardyman is the younger of one of the oldest barons in the English peerage, and that his mother is related by marriage to the royal family of Wurtemberg."

Miss Pink received the full shock of this information without receding from her position by a hair's-breadth.

"An English gentlewoman offers a fit alliance to any man living who seeks her hand in marriage," said Miss Pink. "Isabel's mother you may not be aware of it was the daughter of an English champion."

And Isabel's father was a chemist in a country town," added Lady Lydiard.

"Isabel's father," rejoined Miss Pink, "was attached in a most responsible capacity to the useful and honorable profession of medicine. I feel it is in the strictest sense of the word a young gentleman. If you contrive to fit for a single instant, Lady Lydiard, you will oblige me to have the room."

These last words produced a result which Miss Pink had not anticipated—they roused Lady Lydiard to assert herself. As usual in such cases, she rose superior to her own eccentricity. Confronting Miss Pink, she now stood and looked with the gracious courtesy and the unassuming self-confidence of a young woman.

"I feel in all over-sold, and for the quieting of my own soul, and for the quieting of my own soul, I answered. "I will say one word more, Miss Pink, before I leave you on my present errand. Considering my age and my opportunities, I may claim to have quite as much as you do of the laws and customs which regulate society in our time. Without contesting your niece's social position and without the slightest intention of diminishing it, I may say that the rank which Mr. Hardyman inherits makes it simply impossible for him even to think of marrying Isabel. You will do well not to give him any opportunities of meeting with her alone. And you will do better still (seeing that it is so near a neighbor of yours) if you permit Isabel to return to my protection, for a time, at least. I will wait to hear from you when you have thought the matter over again."

"In the meantime, I will do what I can for the quieting of my own soul, and for the quieting of my own soul, I said. "I will say one word more, Miss Pink, before I leave you on my present errand. Considering my age and my opportunities, I may claim to have quite as much as you do of the laws and customs which regulate society in our time. Without contesting your niece's social position and without the slightest intention of diminishing it, I may say that the rank which Mr. Hardyman inherits makes it simply impossible for him even to think of marrying Isabel. You will do well not to give him any opportunities of meeting with her alone. And you will do better still (seeing that it is so near a neighbor of yours) if you permit Isabel to return to my protection, for a time, at least. I will wait to hear from you when you have thought the matter over again."

She bowed and walked to the door. Miss Pink, as resolute as ever in maintaining her pretensions, made an effort to match the great lady on her own ground.

"Before you go, Lady Lydiard, I beg to apologize if I have spoken too warmly on my side," said. "Permit me to send for your carriage."

"Thank you, Miss Pink. My carriage is only at the village inn. I shall enjoy a little walk in the cool evening air. Mr. Troy, I have no doubt, will give me his arm."

She bowed once more, and quietly left the room.

Reaching the little back garden of the villa through an open door at the farther end of the hall, Lady Lydiard found Tonnie rolling luxuriously on Miss Pink's flower-beds, and Isabel and Mr. Troy in close consultation on the gravel walk. She spoke to the lawyer first.

"They are baiting the horses at the inn," she said. "I want your arm, Mr. Troy, as far as the village, and, in return, I will take you back to London with me. I have to ask your services, and I will call on two little masters, and it is a good opportunity."

"With the permission of your ladyship, Lady Lydiard,"

"I suppose I must say good-bye to Miss Pink."

"A word of advice to you, Mr. Troy. Take care how you ruffle Miss Pink's sense of her own importance. Another word for your private ear—Miss Pink is a fool!"

On the lawyer's withdrawal, Lady Lydiard put her arm firmly round Isabel's waist.

"What do you say, Mr. Troy? So busy in taking advice?" she asked.

"We were talking, my lady, about tracing the person who stole the money," Isabel answered, rather sadly. "It seems a far more difficult matter than I supposed it to be. I try not to lose patience and hope, but it is a little hard to feel that the appearances are against me, and to wait day after day in vain for the discovery that is set me right."

"You are a dear, good child," said Lady Lydiard, "and I am sure you are as anxious to find the thief as I am."

"I don't care," said Felix. "Taking the gentlewoman's profession as a round, I know of men who are so eager to get money, and who have so few scruples about how they get it as the persons. Where is there a man in any other profession who perpetually worries you for money? who holds the bag under your nose for money? who sends his clerk round from door to door to beg a few shillings of you, and calls it an 'Easter offering'?" The person does all this, Bradstock is a parson. I put it logically. Bow me over a little, and I will tell you."

Mr. Troy attempted to "bow him over," nevertheless. Lady Lydiard wisely passed over the compliment.

"When a man persists in talking nonsense," she said, "silence is the best answer; anything else only encourages him." She turned to Felix. "I have a question to ask you," she went on. "Will you still give me a little time?"

With this brief preface, she made her inquiry as to the wisdom and possibility of engaging the services of the French police.

Felix took exactly the view of the master which had been abroad; exercised by Mr. Troy. "Superior in an intelligence" he said, "but not superior in courage to the English police. Capable of protecting winners and losers, but not of protecting losers."

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